

The Long, Last Days of the Grape Whisperer

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CALDWELL, Idaho (KBOI) -- There's a time of day when the sun hits the vines just right and the Sunnyslope hills glow with a golden fire. It's like a gift after a long workday.

Ezequiel Campos savors that light like a fine wine--one made from the grapes his crews pick from dawn until dusk. Campos has been farming this land for more than 30 years and knows all its secrets.

When asked what he knows of grapes, he shrugs his shoulders and says, without a hint of hubris, "Well, everything."

On a walk with him through the vineyards here at the western end of the Treasure Valley, you can learn a great deal about viticulture. The first lesson? That the sun can leave fingerprints on the grapes. And that a sudden frost can kill a vine like a sword slicing at its roots.

His boss likes to say that Ezequiel has forgotten more than almost anyone else will ever learn about grapes, and in his modest way Ezequiel won't argue with that.

"Honestly, Ezequiel has made me look good over the years," says Ron Bitner, co-owner of Bitner Vineyards and an entomologist, or insect expert, by trade.

He supplies grapes for several of Idaho's best-known wineries and is the first to credit Ezequiel for much of his success.

"Ezequiel has made me look good over the years," he says, emphasizing the word "good."

At the factory a mile away from the neat rows of yellowing vines, a forklift is chugging away as the operator lifts a heavy large plastic bin brimming with dark fruit.

The bin tilts and drops its load in a cascade that sounds like bouncing tennis balls.

Ron turns to Ezequiel and grills him about the workday just ended,

"How many bins did you pick today?" he asks.

"Eight," Ezequiel replies.

"Eight? And the first six were Petite Sirah?"

Ezequiel nods in agreement.

Ron Bitner sounds satisfied. But there's a hint of sadness in the exchange. For Bitner, this harvest will be bittersweet because Ezequiel, now 83, is retiring.

He turns to his right-hand man and says approvingly, "You've been part of the Idaho wine industry since the very beginning. I know you'll be out here a little bit next year, but we're all going to miss you."

Bitner remembers when his vines went into the ground back in 1981 and that Ezequiel was on hand to supervise. And here he is, still keeping track, still the gentle persuader.

He almost has to be, at least at the tail end of the harvest, when the morning air can be cold enough to make fingers stiff and feel like a knife to the lungs.

Looking around at the half-dozen pickers bundled against the cold, you wonder how they respond when their minder gets them up at the crack of a red dawn.

"Do people here like you?" a reporter asks.

"Ask them," Ezequiel replies, chuckling.

But you already know the answer.

Ron Bitner offers, "I've had other people out here. They're saying, 'Andele, andele.' Hurry up! I've never once heard Ezequiel say hurry up."

Bitner isn't alone in wondering how he'll manage without Ezequiel's gentle stewardship.

He marvels at the "grape whisperer" in his midst.

"He can estimate the tonnage almost from May to what we're picking right now," says Bitner. "So everybody's going to miss him."

At this time of year, it's a race against the clock, if not the elements.

Bitner looks out at the workers snipping whole dark bunches from the weather-whipped vines and grows philosophical.

"It was cold and wet and rainy this morning and they were out here picking grapes. I always tell everyone to thank our workers when they're enjoying a glass of red wine around a nice warm fire."

Ezequiel grows quiet when asked about his relationship with Bitner. And then says softly, "He's my boss and my friend."

When told that, Ron Bitner gets reflective and can't believe the years have flown by as fast as they have.

He looks at Ezequiel and reminds him, "We've watched your family grow up."

And then they both raise glasses of a scarlet elixir and toast the fading light and each other.

"Salut to 31 years," says Bitner. "And 31 more."

The clink of the glasses echoes across the neat rows below.

Clearly, it's not just the sun leaving fingerprints here in Idaho's wine country.